

ENTER LAUGHING

Lessons Are Over and Now the Moment of Truth Arrives for a Would-Be Stand-Up Comic

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As a teenager, I often sneaked downstairs to watch Johnny Carson's monologue. I laughed even louder than Fat Ed. I fantasized about the day I would do stand - up comedy.

Last week, the day came. For seven minutes, I performed my act at the L.A. Cabaret in Encino. The night before my debut, I dreamed that I was bald. I felt like throwing up.

How would I deal with hecklers?

Worse, how would I deal with silence?

What if I forgot everything?

Help!

Too late. The emcee introduced me, telling the audience I was a "funny guy." How does he know? We had just met. And now I had to prove it.

My chance for fame came when I saw an advertisement in Drama-Logue - a comedy coach offering lessons.

Lessons to be funny? How strange. I just assumed you were born funny.

I called the coach, who promised that he could teach me how to be funny in just a few lessons, so I gave him a chance. In early October, I arrived at Steve North's home, in Tarzana to begin my studies. He greeted me with a silly sailor's cap and a wimpy grin. Great, I'm going to learn comedy from some oddball in Tarzana?

The first thing this oddball told me was to drop the reporter's skepticism or I would bomb for sure.

"You're going to get into a lot of trouble with that attitude," North said, much like Mrs. Markowitz in sixth grade who warned me to stop asking questions or I would be sent to the principal's office.

From the start, North, who has written comedy for television, searched for my "comedic character." The search lasted about-five minutes.

He told me I talk too fast, I have too much self-esteem for my own good, and I enjoy

cruel jokes. Hey, Steve, if I wanted therapy, I could get the real thing.

He wasn't deterred. According to North, anybody can tell a joke. What's much funnier is someone who can sustain a true character. Rodney Dangerfield is the guy who can't get any respect, Garry Shandling is the guy who can't keep a girlfriend.

North decided that Michael Arkush is the guy who thinks so highly of himself that he can't understand why women reject him or when inappropriate social behavior lands him in trouble.

He thought my height made this attitude work. I am 5 feet, 4 inches tall, so people would find it hard to believe that I'm a lady killer, or possess one ounce of machismo.

The next thing was to write the material. I had no clue.

I have written hundreds of articles as a reporter, but I have never written comedy.

North, a patient coach, helped me. Piece by piece, we wove together a routine. I told him about my mother, who is overprotective, annoying and often irrational. A few minutes later, we devised a cruel joke about Mom. I always wanted to do that.

I told him about my fiancée, who is constantly on my case to do more around the house. Presto, she was part of the act.

By the end of the first one-hour lesson, we had written a few bits. I went back to North four more times, developing new material and polishing my delivery on the older stuff. Each time, we tinkered with certain words. North is big on words.

For example, in a joke about me challenging a wheelchair-bound woman to a boxing match, North changed "fight" to "argument" in the line: "I was having this fight with someone." He explained, "fight" would sound like we had already hit each other.

His changes made my material more precise, maximizing the chance for laughs. The setup phrases for each bit, North explained, are as vital as the punch line.

We also worked on my poise. North told me to walk casually around the stage, glance frequently at the audience, and sit on the stool to demonstrate a calm presence.

Finally, after weeks of preparation, it was time to test my material. I grabbed a colleague and asked her to listen.

She did, and she even laughed a few times. Afterward, she told me I was very good. She said it with a straight face.

My fiancée also gave me encouragement, but she's my fiancée, and what else is she going to do?

As my professional stage debut approached, I practiced constantly. At work. In the shower. In the streets. I'm sure I made a wonderful impression as I practiced out loud at a mall parking lot in Studio City several days before my act.

Finally, the night before my performance, I saw the stage for the first time. I did the routine to in an empty room, but there was only one problem. None of it was funny.

That's normal, North assured me. Comics, after practicing forever, never think their stuff is funny anymore. Yeah, Steve, but I'm not a comic! He never seemed to get that.

Then, there was the dream. My head was completely bald. I bolted out of bed, terrified, wondering who was the jerk that suggested I play a stand-up comic for a night. I didn't wonder for long. The jerk was me.

The day finally, mercifully, arrived. At work, I pretended to be secure. I left early for a story on teen-age suicide, certain it would distract me from the task ahead. Instead, it reminded me of my impending suicide on stage.

I then headed to a sports bar to watch my beloved Boston Celtics. They bombed to the Chicago Bulls. Great, another omen.

Shortly before 8, I arrived at L.A. Cabaret. North and his wife, Barb, who also helped coach me, took me into the Green Room. I was so excited. I had always wanted to be in a Green Room just like Carson's guests always talk about. But, guess what? The Green Room wasn't green, it was white! I think it was white! All it is is this tiny room with a bunch of photographs of stars and unknowns who wanted to be stars. What a rip-off.

The preliminaries were over. Shortly after 9PM, the emcee called my name, and I walked to the stage. Just me and my ego.

I shook hands with members of the audience before stepping on stage and grabbing the micro phone. I talked about relationships, sex, my girlfriend and my mother. My friends told me later that I was better than the other comics they had seen that evening, and the tape confirms that.

But I wasn't there. I can't recall a thing.

Except that the lights were almost blinding and the entire seven minutes lasted about a second. I can't remember a conscious thought or feeling on stage. I was a puppet, controlled by some outside force.

I saw the tape and I guess I did some good things. The falsely macho character did emerge in jokes about sex and relationships. I even threw in a few spontaneous lines. For instance, when referring to my sexual exploits, I said, "You've all heard of my work," That was the first time I had used that line. It came from the character I created, not me. I

still can't believe that. And it was my idea to shake hands with the audience.

"I am tremendous in bed," I told the audience. "I can get in there and out of there in 15 seconds." They loved that one. When explaining my athletic prowess, I mentioned how I "kick butt in that 5-foot-2 and-under basketball league. That got a big laugh, too.

I made good use of the stool, managed to look at the crowd from side to side. I was in control. And, thankfully, there were no hecklers or awkward moments of silence to threaten that control.

I made some mistakes however, like forgetting an entire phrase that ruined my joke about trying to pick up a tall woman at a party, and cutting off audience laughter prematurely several times.

The problems came when I stepped out of my comedic character. In the joke about the tall woman, I merely recited lines and failed to engage in the kind of conversational tone that comics use to establish a friendly rapport with the audience.

When it was over, North hugged me and gave my performance a 9 out of 10. Of course, my fiancée told me I was superb.

But I was depressed. I loved the adrenaline I felt before I performed and the accolades I got afterward. It went too fast and now it was over. Or is it? The next morning, I practiced my routine again in the shower. I didn't miss the lines that I had missed the night before. I never stepped out of my character. The laughter in my mind was even louder than the applause on stage.

I can't wait to be tortured again.